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AUTHOR Hawke, Sharryl
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ABSTRACT

A junior high school geography class in La Palma, California, offers extensive field trip experiences to teach students methods of historical-geographical research. Resulting from a course that develops research methods in social studies, a club was formed that provides overnight excursions in various field activities. The club is open to 9th and 10th grade students who have completed prerequisite course offerings that provide background in the fundamentals of historical research. Through the use of primary and secondary source materials, students develop skills in map and chart reading and interpreting survey reports and aerial photographs. Members of the club apply this knowledge while participating in field expeditions that can last from a 3-day weekend trip to 11-day outings during long school vacations. In the field, students learn the techniques of historians, geographers, archaeologists, and geologists in identifying geological landmarks, looking for historical artifacts, and surviving in primitive conditions. One such activity allowed the students to spend a week at Fort Bridger, a nearby community resource, living as much like the original poineer inhabitants as possible. Students keep accurate logs of their activities and findings. Evaluation is based on students' written reports and overall performances. After completing the course students view social studies as a vital, living study and better understand the importance of cooperation and working together. (Author/JR)

For further information:

WRITE:

Todd I. Berens
Walker Junior High School
8132 Walker Street
La Palma, California 90623

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If you know of other significant practices write a one page description, including the name and address of a person to contact for further information, and send to:

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Out of the Classroom--Into the Field

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In 1972 a Sierra Club committee published an appeal for public-spirited organizations to "help save the deserts." The urgency of the request resulted from a government report detailing a dramatic increase in the use of desert areas for industrial and residential purposes. The Sierra Club's hope was that remaining desert areas could be thoroughly surveyed and documented before more historical and geological information was lost to encroaching development.

One organization responding to this plea was the Explorer Club of La Palma, California. The Explorers set as their goal "to prepare a historical-geographical report which would trace the development of human activity on the Mojave Desert." (Later the area was limited to a smaller region.) In the next few months club members did preliminary research in libraries, studied maps and photographs, consulted with other organizations, practiced skills needed in archaeological and geological exploration, and laid their plans for an on-site survey of the area.

In April 1973, 21 members of the Explorer Club set out for an 11-day field study of the tri-state region of Arizona, California, and Nevada known as the Davis Dam Quadrangle. On foot and by jeep, teams of researchers conducted surveys of selected sites from the mountain ranges bordering the Colorado River to the urban areas in the region.

After returning home, the Explorers compiled their findings and compared their maps and drawings with historical descriptions they gathered in their preliminary research. The final product of their work was a comprehensive report on the historical-geographical characteristics of the region--a report which earned the Award of Merit from the American Association for State and Local History.

The California Desert Program is just one of many projects undertaken by the "award-winning" Explorer Club in the past few years. Who are these ambitious explorers? Professional geologists, college historians? No. The Explorer Club is a group of young students--average age 14--from Walker Junior High School in La Palma, California.

Founder and director of the Explorer Club is Todd Berens, who teaches social studies at Walker. Berens, a 12-year Marine veteran turned teacher, firmly believes that social studies "should be taught in the field, not the classroom." This conviction, coupled with administrative support and student enthusiasm, has resulted in a unique learning experience for many Walker students.

FROM CLASS TO CLUB

Todd Berens came to Walker in 1968 after completing his master's degree in geography. His Master's thesis focused on the travels of early pioneers through southern Utah. The research he conducted for his study impressed him with the excitement and value of field research.

Determined not to allow his geography classes to become dull, Berens began organizing one-day field excursions for his students. On these trips he showed students how to identify geological landmarks, look for historical artifacts, read maps and surveys, and survive in primitive conditions.

The one-day trips were quite popular with his students, but Berens felt more could be accomplished on longer trips. Because a school district regulation made it impossible for classes to stay out overnight, members of Berens' classes incorporated into the Explorer Club; as a club they are not bound by the same overnight restriction.

The Explorer Club is presently open only to 9th-grade students who are enrolled in Berens' "Research Methods in Social Science" course and to 10th-graders who have completed the course. To qualify for the Research Methods course, a student must first complete an 8th-grade "American Frontiers" course taught by Berens. In American Frontiers, students learn the fundamentals of historical research through an in-depth study of the Lewis and Clark expedition. A second entrance requirement for Research Methods is that a student have a reading ability above his grade level.

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Even with these requirements, some 130 students apply each year for the 30 class openings.

Funding for club activities comes from several sources. The school district provides some support and released time for Berens; the Walker P.T.A. and Booster Club contribute; the Buena Park Optimist Club supports special projects; and club members conduct fund-raising activities. The club now owns a considerable amount of camping and exploring equipment; the only expense to students for field trips is the cost of personal clothing and a minimal food assessment.

OUT OF THE CLASSROOM

The primary objective of the Research Methods course and the Explorer Club is to teach students methods of historical-geographical research. Beyond this specific aim, Berens feels the course also fosters an intellectual curiosity about the students' world, gets the young people excited about field research, and teaches them the necessity of cooperative group effort.

There is no set curriculum for Research Methods, and the course varies from year to year. Curriculum depends on what projects present themselves or what materials become available. When a project such as the California Desert Program arises, the students in the course may decide to make it their primary focus. Most classes concentrate on one or two projects a year.

Textbooks or commercial curriculum materials are not used in the course; instead, students work only with primary and secondary source materials. They learn how to find and examine old journals and diaries as well as how to read maps, charts, survey reports, and aerial photographs. Students also consult with people who have firsthand information or special expertise in relevant fields.

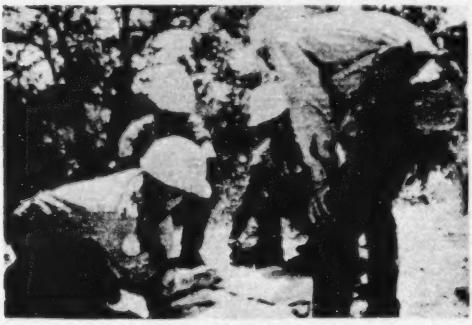
Field excursions are determined by the class project for the year; all trips, usually about ten, are designed to gather information related to the project. While learning experiences overlap from one trip to the next, Berens tries to plan a slightly different focus for each outing. One trip may concentrate on archaeological skills while another emphasizes geographical concepts.

In the field, students learn the techniques used by historians, geographers, archaeologists, and geologists. They learn to identify geological formations which can be used to help authenticate maps and journals. They learn the basics of archaeological excavation, so they can extract and classify artifacts they might find. By reading maps, they plot and trace trails and routes referred to in diaries of early pioneers and explorers.

The length of the field expeditions varies from three-day weekend trips to 11-day outings during long school vacations. Before students are allowed to go on long trips, Berens makes certain they are able to cope with outdoor living. Students are given "practice runs" on the shorter trips to learn the skills necessary for camping, preparing food, finding directions, marking trails, and generally participating in what must be a cooperative effort.

Students cannot be required to go on field trips, but most are eager to go when personal schedules permit. Berens says it usually works out that only about 20 students can

Explorer Club research methods include...



Using maps and photographs
to trace pioneer trails

Learning mountain climbing skills
necessary in exploration

go on any one trip, and this is the number he feels is most manageable. In addition to Berens, the Explorers are usually accompanied by Mrs. Berens and some graduates of Research Methods who are continuing in the Explorer Club. These older students assist Berens in teaching younger students necessary skills; they also serve as team leaders for small research groups.

At the end of the year each student prepares a final report; sometimes individual reports are compiled into a comprehensive document. Berens stresses clarity and accuracy in reports and requires footnotes and bibliographies.

Berens acknowledges that it is sometimes difficult to evaluate student work when final grades are due. His method is to determine specific objectives--for example, to identify five primary source materials--and to award points for meeting the objectives. But he also considers more subjective factors such as cooperation, diligence, and interest. In the end it is a student's overall performance which Berens tries to reflect in his final evaluation.

IN THE FIELD

Over the past six years the Explorers have taken some 60 trips and traveled thousands of miles. Three trips illustrate the diversity and scope of the Explorer expeditions.

During the summer of 1969, the Berens and 17 students set out for Utah to trace the Old Spanish Trail across the southern part of the state. Preparation for the trip began in the summer of 1968 when Berens and three students spent two weeks in Salt Lake City examining documents and records at the Utah Historical Society. During the 1968-69 school year, students in Research Methods studied copies of the documents located in Salt Lake City plus aerial photographs and maps of the area which they would visit. Their objective on the trip was to relive the experiences of early pioneers and to authenticate the records of the travelers who followed the Old Spanish Trail.

After arriving in Enterprise, Utah, each student was assigned the diary or journal of a pioneer. Their specific task was to locate land markings corresponding with what the pioneers described in their records. Some students were able to locate rock formations described in their journals, and other students discovered writings dating back to 1857 on the walls of sandstone cliffs. As they explored, they documented their findings in detail. The students finished the journey, not only knowing more factual history, but also having a great appreciation for the pioneer experience.

In a different sort of activity, 11 Explorers spent a week at Fort Bridger, Wyoming, in the summer of 1973. Fort Bridger is an old military post now under the jurisdiction of the Wyoming Recreation Commission, which maintains it as a living museum. Each year the Museum staff invites interested historians to help man the fort for the many tourists who visit the site in the summer.

During the week the Explorers spent at Fort Bridger, they lived as much like the pioneers who originally inhabited the fort as possible. By reading early documents, the students learned how the settlers prepared soap, baked bread, and made candy, and they demonstrated these skills for the fort's visitors. Other activities included

Perfecting archaeological techniques by digging for artifacts

Searching for source material in library collections

Keeping records of the day's findings

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replacing spokes on broken wagon wheels, refurbishing a cannon, and cutting and splitting the necessary wood supply.

In his report of the week spent at Fort Bridger, one student wrote, "The learning experience that the living history program afforded was invaluable... I cannot say that I was actually living like the pioneers, but I was given a pretty good idea of how they lived... The experience offered education on everything from social attitudes toward people to the selection of the correct type of mosquito repellent."

One year the Explorers were asked to pit their talents against time when it was discovered that the proposed construction site for a new highway near Enterprise, Utah, would probably destroy the grave of an early pioneer. The grave's location was considered important to the exact plotting of an all-weather route, traveled by many pioneers, and known as the Mormon Corridor. Walker students were asked by the district U.S. Forest Service ranger, with whom they had previously worked, to try to locate the grave before it was graded away in the construction process.

The Explorers left for the site, equipped with maps and journals with which they hoped to pinpoint the location and conduct the initial digging. The remainder of the excavating would be done by a U.S. Forest Service team. To their dismay, the October weather produced an unexpected snow storm which prevented them from making a detailed examination of the site. However, the group was able to prepare some alternative routes for the highway, which would keep heavy equipment away from the most likely location of the grave until a further investigation could be made.

Graduates of the Research Methods course may continue as members of Explorers and receive high school credit for independent research. In 1970, Berens accompanied some of his former students on a three-week trip of four Western states. Each student explored and plotted several lesser known immigrant trails in the areas visited. Another Explorer excavated an old Indian cave "two inches at a time." Forest rangers asked the student to prepare a display of the artifacts he found in the cave for visitors to their ranger station.

A photography enthusiast followed the section survey of an early railroad, photographing as he went. In his work he discovered one latitude-longitude marker had been mislocated by the railroad, so he set about to discover why the error had been made. Two girls spent their time studying a rock formation known as "The City of Rocks" on which dozens of early travelers had etched their names or initials. The students compiled a record of these names and sent it to the Bancroft Library at the University of California to be used by historians in documenting pioneer travel.

THE REWARDS OF RESEARCH

The work and discipline of the Explorer Club has been rewarded. Club activities have been recognized with awards from the Conference of California Historical Societies, the Utah State Historical Society, and the American Association for State and Local History. Students have been interviewed on Los Angeles television about their work and have given demonstrations of field techniques at historical society meetings.

Reliving pioneer experiences at Fort Bridger

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Historians have praised the quality of the students' work. The Bancroft Library has accepted several of the class reports to add to its collection of Western Americana. The late Dale L. Morgan, research historian, noted that the work being done by Walker students was truly collegiate level research. In fact, he stated, "even in the undergraduate college level, one rarely sees this kind of integration of field research with documentary research in any area of history."

Although this recognition is rewarding, Berens believes the most important result of the students' work is what they gain personally from the course. Berens would be delighted to have some of his students pursue careers as historians or geographers, but he is satisfied if the young people come to view social studies as a "vital, living" study. Apparently his approach is accomplishing this goal, at least in the opinion of the student who wrote, "History has really come alive for us; this class has turned me on to history. It was always the subject I hated most. Now I'm out buying history books for the enjoyment of reading them."

Intellectual learning is only part of the learning experience in Research Methods and the Explorer Club. When Berens asks his students at the end of the school year what they have gained from the class, he often gets this answer, "I've learned more about myself and others; I know my own strengths and weaknesses. I also better understand the importance of cooperation and working together." For these students, social studies is much more than just history and geography.

ERIC DOCUMENTS:

ED 084 676: LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM: THE ROLE OF FIELD EXPERIENCES IN THE SCHOOL PROGRAM. 26 pp. MF: $.75. HC: $1.85. This document contains a set of recommendations on how to make educational field experiences a central aspect of the curriculum, in order to obtain maximum benefit from such involvement in the community.

ED 084 169: HOW TO CONDUCT A FIELD TRIP. HOW TO DO IT SERIES, NUMBER 17. 8 pp. MF: $.75, HC Available from National Council for the Social Studies, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036 ($.25 each, Quantity Discount). This guide related the process of taking a field trip and includes a bibliography of general materials, articles on what others are doing, and suggested films and filmstrips.

ED 081 587: TRIP LEADERS GUIDE. OUTDOOR EXPEDITIONS AND CLASSES. 35 pp. Available from Bob Leister, Hartford Middle School, White River Junction, Vermont 05001 ($1.00). Written to help teachers or leaders plan and lead field trips, excursions, or expeditions, this pamphlet provides assistance in conducting learning experiences outside the classroom. It is particularly geared to outdoor education.

ED 080 366: FIELD LEARNING ACTIVITIES. 281 pp. MF: $.75. HC: $13.80. Seventy field activities, designed for elementary and junior high school students and pertinent to outdoor and environmental studies, are described in this compilation.

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